

Measuring Progress Towards Becoming a Trauma-Informed School



Project
AWARE

Are we there yet?

Understanding if we have reached our destination is becoming an ever-more present question for schools on the path towards becoming trauma-informed. How do we measure success? How do we know when we have reached the goals and outcomes that will signify we are a trauma-informed school? As with most long trips, it is as much about the journey as the destination. Becoming a trauma-informed school or district is not a program to be implemented; it is a strategy or approach that encompasses many different aspects of the school system. It requires a paradigm shift in the way we think about school culture and climate, discipline, teaching and learning, staff professional development, budgeting, policy, and so much more.



Being a trauma-informed system prioritizes safety, relationships, and a compassionate restorative culture and climate. This can be a big shift from the previous way of doing things. Creating this kind of fundamental change in school culture, climate, and systems takes time and intention. Most research agrees that sustainable change in a school takes 3-5 years minimum with consistent commitment towards a shared vision; this is no different for the journey to become a trauma-informed school.

According to SAMHSA (<https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>), **a program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed:**

1. *Realizes* the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;
2. *Recognizes* the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system;
3. *Responds* by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
4. Seeks to actively resist *re-traumatization*.

SAMHSA's 6 Guiding Principles of Trauma Informed Care¹

1. **Safety** - Throughout the organization, staff and the people they serve feel physically and psychologically safe.
2. **Trustworthiness and transparency** - Organizational operations and decisions are conducted with transparency and the goal of building and maintaining trust among staff, clients, and family members of those receiving services.
3. **Peer support and mutual self-help** - These are integral to the organizational and service delivery approach and are understood as a key vehicle for building trust, establishing safety, and empowerment.

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA, 2014.

4. **Collaboration and mutuality** - There is true partnering and leveling of power differences between staff and clients and among organizational staff from direct care staff to administrators. There is recognition that healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making. The organization recognizes that everyone has a role to play in a trauma-informed approach. One does not have to be a therapist to be therapeutic.
5. **Empowerment, voice, and choice** - Throughout the organization and among the clients served, individuals' strengths are recognized, built on, and validated and new skills developed as necessary. The organization aims to strengthen the staff's, clients', and family members' experience of choice and recognize that every person's experience is unique and requires an individualized approach. This includes a belief in resilience and in the ability of individuals, organizations, and communities to heal and promote recovery from trauma. This builds on what clients, staff, and communities have to offer, rather than responding to perceived deficits.
6. **Cultural, historical, and gender issues** - The organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, geography), offers gender responsive services, leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections, and recognizes and addresses historical trauma

How do we incorporate these concepts specifically around building resilient trauma-informed school environments?

A trauma-informed school **realizes** the impact of trauma and **recognizes** the signs and symptoms. This happens through ongoing, job-embedded, high-quality professional development about brain science, the impact of trauma on learning and behavior, and resilience building strategies. The school **responds** by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, practices, and procedures and by actively eliminating those policies, practices, and procedures that could **re-traumatize** students, families, and staff.



Safety - There are many ways that schools can help students, families, and staff feel safe both physically and psychologically.

- Create predictable routines, and follow these to the best of our ability in the classroom. Create predictable routines in the classroom to give students confidence, help them achieve independence, and reduce anxiety. Predictability at the school level creates a sense of safety. Alert students when possible before any changes in routine.
- Create conditions for calm. Set up practices in the classroom and school that help create a sense of order and calm, reduce chaos, and minimize feelings of being out of control. Examples of these include the following:
 - Install indirect lighting and natural lighting; avoid fluorescents if possible.
 - Use warm, soft colors on your walls, including paint and decorations.
 - Add plants to the classroom and school.
 - Incorporate a few minutes of mindfulness, stretching, and/or focused breathing into the classroom routine.

- Include community-building activities all year long; this will help grow and maintain a feeling of belonging and emotional safety.
- Praising people publicly, and holding them accountable privately, creates a sense of psychological safety for students and staff.
- Use a restorative approach to discipline. This approach to discipline focuses on repairing harm through inclusive processes that engage all involved. Restorative justice shifts the focus of discipline from punishment to learning, with an emphasis on relationships. This helps create a sense of belonging and psychological safety.

Trustworthiness and transparency - Being transparent and inclusive about how and why decisions are made creates conditions for trust. Relationships are fundamental to this process, and trust is the cornerstone.

- Include students and staff in creating expectations and norms for behavior, being transparent and consistent with follow-through.
- Model the behavior that is expected.
- Follow through on commitments.

Peer support and mutual self-help - Prioritizing school employee wellness and building a culture that supports collective self-care is essential.

- Provide professional development for staff to build knowledge about concepts such as compassion fatigue and burnout, and what to do to prevent these from happening.
- Share strategies and activities for building staff wellness and resilience.
- Offer safe, calm spaces for staff to recharge.
- Make staff aware of how to ask for help and encourage them to do so.

Collaboration and mutuality - Collaboration should be highly valued and practiced amongst administration, amongst staff, and in the classroom. Meaningful and *authentic* power-sharing strengthen trust and relationships.

- The administration should practice distributed and adaptive leadership.
- Encourage collaboration through Professional Learning Communities; shared planning; co-teaching; peer coaching; and protocols such as [Adaptive Schools](#) and [National School Reform Faculty](#) strategies.

Empowerment, voice, and choice - Students, families, and all staff must feel empowered, valued, and validated.

- Students should feel empowered and the existing knowledge they hold should be validated. Empowered students to feel ownership over their learning and feel the work they are doing is meaningful and important. The cultural knowledge students bring into the classroom should be recognized, valued, and incorporated into the curriculum.
- Give students some voice and choice about what and how they learn.
- Encourage teacher leadership; empower teachers and staff to demonstrate leadership.
- Create highly engaging classrooms that allow for student voice.

- Authentically involve families. Engage families as equal partners, building the capacity of all stakeholders. Move beyond a compliance mentality and towards true partnership. Draw on resources such as [Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#) and [Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for How School District Promote Family Engagement](#).

Cultural, historical, and gender issues – A trauma-informed school actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases. It recognizes previous history with the system as being a traumatizing experience for many.

- Practice culturally responsive, brain based pedagogy.
- Ensure that the curriculum is relevant; students should see themselves represented.
- Recognize, value, and celebrate all family cultures.
- As a school, become acutely aware of the experience of your LGBTQ students.

OK, so now what? How do we know if we are doing all of this and if it is working?

The good news is that the concepts above can be measured by many of the tools schools are already using. Several specific tools have been developed to measure how trauma-informed a system is, as well as attitudes of staff towards becoming trauma-informed. Many of these are free.



- Measuring progress with many of these strategies is included in high-quality school culture and climate assessments given to students, staff, and families. One example is the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) free online assessment, [ED School Climate Surveys](#) (EDSCLS). These assessments include questions around safety, collaboration, environment, and relationships.
- Tracking school level data around discipline and attendance is already required; schools should also incorporate data study strategies like the [ATLAS Looking at Data protocol from the School Reform Initiative](#). This protocol is used by a leadership team to analyze the data, make meaning of it for their school, and collectively make decisions on where to go next.
- Collecting data on mental health referrals and follow-up on the referrals will tell a school how it is doing in meeting the mental health needs of students and families and where the gaps lie. Looking at teacher attendance may offer insight into how well the school is doing on implementing a culture of collective self-care.
- Examine physical space: are there safe spaces for students and staff to regulate and restore? Both students and staff need a safe place for a “time-in” rather than a “time-out.” If possible, a school should set aside a calm room where students, and staff, can regulate and take a mental break in a safe space. This space should be away from the primary traffic in the school, which can help maintain privacy and reduce the possible stigma associated with accessing the space. This room could include rugs, bean bag chairs, yoga mats, indirect light, aromatherapy, and warm colors on the wall. It could include a space for calming activities like drawing, Legos, playdough, journaling,

and reading. Pay attention to the staff breakrooms; creating a welcoming and positive environment in the staff lounge can go a long way towards school employee wellness. A good resource on reviving your staff breakroom comes from Kaiser Permanente’s Thriving Schools: [Recharge Your Staff and Teachers with a Healthier Break Room](#).

- Consider conducting focus groups of students, families, and staff with questions specifically targeted towards the principles of a trauma-informed environment. For example, do students feel that they have a voice in the classroom? Do they feel curricula are relevant and culturally responsive? Do they feel that positive relationships between adults and students are prioritized and valued? Do staff feel like a culture of self-care is explicitly valued? Do families feel included in decision-making?

Once a school has collected the data mentioned above, there should be a series of meetings with all stakeholders to review the data, create shared meaning of what is there, and determine priorities for next steps in the school’s journey toward becoming a trauma-informed environment. This should be a regular ongoing cycle of data-based decision making focused on inquiry and collective action.

Trauma-Informed Schools: Measurement Strategies and Tools

The following grids provide suggested ways to assess a school or district’s level of being trauma informed. These assessments can be used to look at trauma, resilience, and healing in the school community through a variety of complementary lenses.

School Level Data	
Assessment of:	Strategy and/or Tool:
Discipline	Track and analyze data for suspensions, expulsions, in-school detentions, and referrals out of the classroom. For each of these areas, disaggregate data by which students, how often, what infractions, which teachers are making referrals, and for what they are referred. Use a data analysis protocol such as ATLAS Looking at Data and look for patterns or significant points in the data. This will give you a tremendous amount of information and help your team decide where to prioritize first steps.
Attendance	Analyze attendance data, disaggregating by which student, how often, and reasons for absence. Students experiencing trauma may exhibit high rates of absenteeism.
Mental health and counselor referrals	Track numbers of referrals to onsite and offsite support, identifying which students are referred for mental health services or sent to school support services for further intervention. Identify patterns of concern and gaps in support.
Onsite supportive spaces	Determine the presence of onsite relaxation of safe spaces and the numbers of students and teachers accessing those services and spaces.

Staff and Teacher Data	
Assessment of:	Strategy and/or Tool:
Teacher attendance	Track staff attendance. Notice if the data show areas of concern, such as potential staff that are showing signs of compassion fatigue or burnout; this may highlight staff wellness needs.
Staff turnover, retention, and burnout	Measure overall job satisfaction. The ProQOL is the most commonly used measure of the negative and positive effects of helping others who experience suffering and trauma. The ProQOL has sub-scales for compassion satisfaction, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Use to measure employee psychosocial functioning – wellness, burnout, fatigue, stress, depression, and anxiety.
Staff attitudes	The ARTIC is a measure of professional and paraprofessional attitudes favorable or unfavorable toward a Trauma Informed System.

All School Environmental Scan	
Assessment of:	Strategy and/or Tool:
School climate	Use to measure perceived relationship quality (adult-adult and adult-student) and perceived safety by students and staff. The EDSCLS is one example that is online and free.
Trauma sensitivity	Lesley University and the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative developed the Trauma-Sensitive Schools Checklist based on five components involved in a trauma-sensitive school.
Progress toward TIC	Although still in draft form, Standards of Practice for Trauma Informed Care in Educational Settings provides excellent discussion questions for a leadership team to consider where they are in the process of becoming a trauma-informed school. It was developed by Trauma Informed Oregon.
Written policies, practices, and documents	Review Tool for School Policies, Protocols, Procedures and Documents: Examination through a Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) Lens is a fillable template to assess how well these items align with TIC values. It provides a list of comparisons between the common view and the trauma-informed view (e.g., “uses professional ‘insider’ language” versus “uses language that can be understood by children and families”).