



# TRAUMA and LEARNING POLICY INITIATIVE

[www.traumasensitiveschools.org](http://www.traumasensitiveschools.org)

## THE PROBLEM

### **Prevalence of trauma**

Many students come to school each day having experienced traumatic events that impact their relationships, behavior and learning. Studies now show that nearly every school has children who have been exposed to overwhelming experiences. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study lists seven categories of adverse childhood experiences including witnessing violence between a child's caretakers, being the direct targets of physical, sexual or psychological abuse, living with a parent with mental illness, substance abuse or involvement in criminal behavior. The [ACE study](#) found higher levels of traumatic experiences in the general population than previously imagined and further studies have expanded our understanding of the prevalence of adverse experiences in childhood. When we include children who are chronically bullied, live with homelessness, or in the proximity of pervasive community violence, are shuttled around the foster care system or live with a parent traumatized by combat, these studies demonstrate that adverse experiences are more pervasive than many educators currently recognize. **Experts explain that trauma is not an event itself, but rather a response to one or more overwhelmingly stressful events where one's ability to cope is dramatically undermined.**

## THE IMPACT

### **Traumatic experiences can impact learning, behavior and relationships at school.**

Recent neurobiological, epigenetics, and psychological studies have shown that traumatic experiences in childhood can diminish concentration, memory, and the organizational and language abilities children need to succeed in school. For some children, this can lead to problems with academic performance, inappropriate behavior in the classroom, and difficulty forming relationships. Learning about the impacts of trauma can help educators understand the underlying reasons behind students' challenges at school. For more information on the impact of trauma on learning, see Chapter One of our purple book, [Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume One](#).

## THE SOLUTION

### **Trauma-sensitive schools help children feel safe to learn.**

Once schools understand the educational impacts of trauma, they can become safe, supportive environments where students make the positive connections with adults and peers they might otherwise push away, calm their emotions so they can focus and behave appropriately, and feel confident enough to advance their learning. Trauma sensitivity will look different at each school. However, a shared definition of what it means to be a trauma-sensitive school can bring educators, parents, and policymakers together around a common vision. We offer this definition:

A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the center of its educational mission. An on-going, inquiry based process allows for the necessary teamwork, coordination, creativity and sharing of responsibility for all students.

We define the **core attributes of a trauma-sensitive school** to include the following:

- ***A shared understanding among all staff— of how trauma impacts learning and why a school-wide approach is needed for creating a trauma-sensitive school***
- ***The school supports all children to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, and academically.***
- ***The school addresses students' needs in holistic ways, helping students build skills, taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being.***
- ***The school explicitly connects students to the school community and provides multiple opportunities to practice newly developing skills.***
- ***The school embraces teamwork and staff share responsibility for all students.***
- ***Leadership and staff anticipate and adapt to the ever-changing needs of students and the surrounding community.***

## HOW WE GET THERE

**Trauma sensitivity requires a whole-school effort.**

All children, including those affected by adversity, can succeed in school. Children need to feel safe and connected to adults and peers everywhere in the school. Addressing trauma's impact at school requires that adults share responsibility for all children. This requires the teamwork of everyone in the school. Becoming a trauma-sensitive school requires not only a deep understanding of trauma's impact on learning but also the need for a school wide approach. The inquiry-based process unleashes the creativity of educators about how best to address the most pressing urgencies in the school. The use of the Flexible Framework (as described in depth in [Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume Two](#)) supports the school's efforts to weave trauma-sensitive approaches into important school operations, including:

- ***Leadership***
- ***Professional Development***
- ***Access to resources and services***
- ***Academic and non-academic strategies***
- ***Policies, procedures and protocols***
- ***Collaboration with families***

**Helping traumatized children learn should be a major focus of education reform.**

Schools, which are significant communities for children and teachers, must be adequately supported in order to address trauma's impact on learning. The answer is not to ask teachers or individual schools to solve these problems on their own or in a piecemeal fashion but rather to develop a broad public policy agenda in which schools play a key role. To ensure that children achieve at their highest potential, we must make sure that research on trauma's impact on learning is widely understood and informs decision-making at the public policy level. In short, helping traumatized children learn should become a major focus of education reform.

# SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS LAW

The Safe and Supportive Schools Framework statute ([MGL c. 69, § 1P](#)), enacted in August, 2014 by the Massachusetts legislature, establishes a statewide “safe and supportive schools framework” to assist schools to create safe and supportive learning environments “that improve educational outcomes for students.” The law includes a **definition of “safe and supportive schools”** as: “... schools that foster a safe, positive, healthy and inclusive whole school learning environment that

- (i) enables students to develop positive relationships with adults and peers, regulate their emotions and behavior, achieve academic and non-academic success in school and maintain physical and psychological health and well-being; and
- (ii) integrates services and aligns initiatives that promote students' behavioral health, including social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, trauma sensitivity, dropout prevention, truancy reduction, children's mental health, foster care and homeless youth education, inclusion of students with disabilities, positive behavioral approaches that reduce suspensions and expulsions and other similar initiatives.”  
[MGL c. 69, § 1P(a)]

In addition to the definition, the law established the **Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Assessment Tool** that schools can use to:

- 1) identify their urgencies
- 2) develop an action plan
- 3) integrate initiatives, and then
- 4) include the action steps in the School Improvement Plan, required by MGL c. 69 § 11

The Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Assessment Tool are designed to help each school develop school-wide action plans that efficiently align initiatives in a way that fits with the school's (and district's) own culture and locally-identified priorities. The elements of the Safe and Supportive Schools [Framework](#) are organized according to the following areas of school operations:

- leadership,
- professional development,
- access to resources and services,
- academic and non-academic supports,
- policies, procedures, and protocols, and
- collaboration with families.

The law also established the [Safe and Supportive Schools Commission](#) to assist with statewide implementation of the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and to make ongoing recommendations to the legislature. In addition, the law established, subject to appropriation (through line item 7061-9612), the [Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Program](#) to enable schools to serve as exemplars to others, and provided for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to provide technical assistance to schools, among other tasks, to support implementation across the Commonwealth.

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